



NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
BUREAU

BELONGING MATTERS

BELONGING MATTERS: WHAT HELPS PUPILS FEEL THEY TRULY BELONG IN LONDON'S SCHOOLS?

SUMMARY OF INTERIM
FINDINGS FROM THE
BELONGING MATTERS
PROGRAMME

June 2025



INTRODUCTION



This short report summarises interim findings from *Belonging Matters*, a new innovative whole-school programme developed by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to improve pupils' sense of belonging.

The evaluation is being carried out by researchers at Goldsmiths, University of London and you can read their full interim report [here](#).

We are grateful to the [Kusuma Trust](#) for funding this innovative pilot, which is helping us understand how to strengthen children and young people's sense of belonging in schools and improve their life outcomes.





CONTENTS

Introduction 1

About the programme 3

Main findings 4

Why is school belonging important? 5

Pupil questionnaire results 6

Parent and Carer Perspectives on Belonging 8

School Staff Perspectives on Pupil Belonging 10

The impact of the programme so far 12

About the National Children’s Bureau 14

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

Belonging Matters is an 18-month evidence-based programme led by NCB, delivered in partnership with its specialist membership groups - the Anti-Bullying Alliance and the Council for Disabled Children. It aims to strengthen pupils' sense of belonging, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Belonging Matters promotes inclusive school environments by strengthening teacher-student relationships, encouraging positive peer interactions, fostering parental engagement, and supporting school policies that actively promote belonging.

The programme is being piloted in 11 London schools between June 2024 and July 2025. These include mainstream primary and secondary schools, a special school, and an alternative provision setting.

Participating schools work with NCB to develop:

- A customised, data-informed whole-school audit and action plan
- An online Pupil Belonging Questionnaire and questionnaire for parents and staff

Schools also receive NCB's expert support package, which includes:

- Access to a community of practice to share learning and resources
- A year of expert support from NCB
- Training for senior leads and all staff on the *Belonging Matters* framework and tailored implementation guidance
- Access to school-wide data to support improvement planning and demonstrate impact for Ofsted or workforce development

Baseline data has been independently analysed by Goldsmiths. This report summarises those initial findings. A full impact report will follow by the end of 2025.

Data collected so far:

- 10 of the 11 schools submitted usable baseline data
- 1,214 pupils completed the Pupil Questionnaire: Pupils were from seven primary schools, two secondary schools, and one sixth form plus school. 61% of responses were from primary pupils, and 39% from secondary pupils
- 435 parents and carers completed the Parent/Carer Questionnaire: 54% were from primary schools, and 46% from secondary schools
- 248 school staff completed the Staff Questionnaire: 58% were from primary schools, and 42% from secondary schools
- School audit information about their current practice relating to belonging
- Training feedback and senior leads feedback

MAIN FINDINGS

What do the baseline findings reveal about pupil belonging in schools in London?



Pupil survey insights

- 1 in 3 pupils say they rarely or never feel like they belong at school.
- Pupils with SEND report more negative experiences across all questions.
- Belonging drops significantly in secondary schools compared to primary.



Parent/carer survey insights

- Parents are more positive than pupils, but concerns mirror pupil findings.
- Parents of children with SEND report higher levels of concern.
- Secondary parents report more negatively than those in primary.



Staff survey insights

- Staff more positive overall, but secondary school concerns stand out.
- Inclusion and connection are reported lower in secondary settings.

Early signs of the impact of Belonging Matters in schools:

While we are halfway through the delivery of this new programme in schools we are already starting to see inroads of success and some exciting ideas being tested:



19 belonging training sessions delivered
- 4 in person,
15 online

408 staff trained across 11 schools, including 27 senior leaders



88.3% of senior leaders reported a **significant or transformative** impact on their understanding of how to promote pupil safety

97.2% of staff feel confident in fostering an inclusive environment



100% of senior leaders are extremely or very likely to use the daily strategies shared to foster belonging

Each school has established an action plan for change and is embarking on making that change in school



"We've started talking about belonging in every SLT meeting. It's not an add-on - it's what holds everything else together." - Belonging Matters Participant

"When visitors come in, they don't know who the children with SEND are." - Belonging Matters Participant

We are in awe of what schools have already achieved, embedding belonging deeply into systems, culture, and everyday practice. We look forward to sharing the full impact in autumn 2025 and continue trailblazing this work together.

WHY IS SCHOOL BELONGING IMPORTANT?

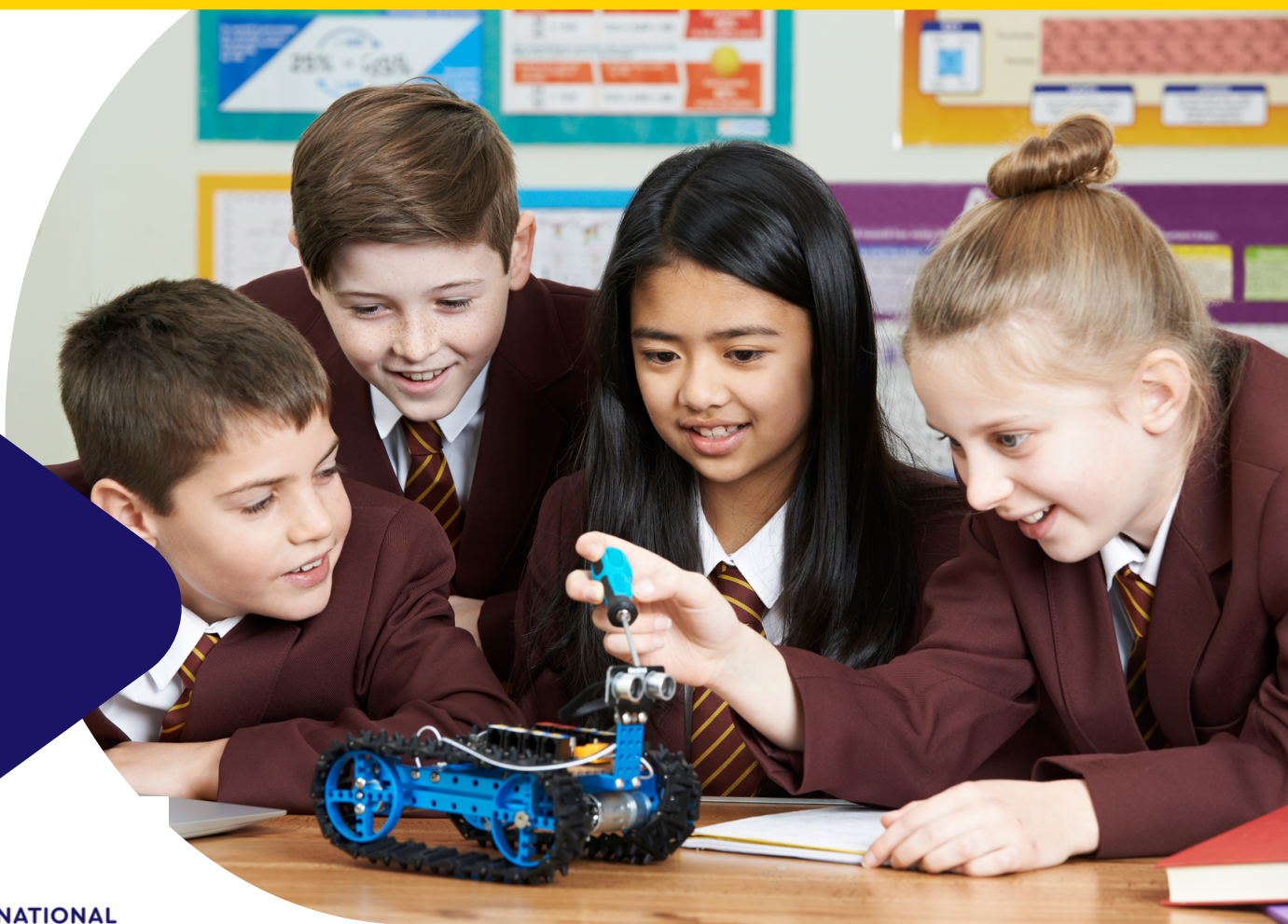
Research shows that belonging in school is vital for children's wellbeing, academic success, and overall development. Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are among those most at risk of feeling they don't belong in school, as they often encounter significant barriers to inclusion and participation in school life. When pupils feel accepted, respected, and included, they are more likely to engage in learning, build positive relationships, and thrive both emotionally and socially. Research shows that a strong sense of belonging is linked to higher attendance, better mental health, and reduced bullying. To foster belonging, schools can focus on nurturing positive relationships between staff and pupils, promoting inclusive practices, involving families and communities, and creating safe, supportive environments where all children feel seen and valued.

For more on the evidence behind what supports belonging in schools, read our full literature review here: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/belongingmatters/literaturereview>.

What does it mean to belong at school?

Belonging Matters has adopted the following definition of belonging;

"School belonging is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" - Allen et al, 2018¹



PUPIL QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

As part of our wider pupil survey, we asked children and young people a questionnaire consisting of a series of well-tested questions that explore their sense of belonging, support, and inclusion at school. In the [full report](#), you can find detailed analysis of each individual item in our questionnaire. Here, we present a summary of the most stark and concerning findings.

Key messages from our pupil survey:

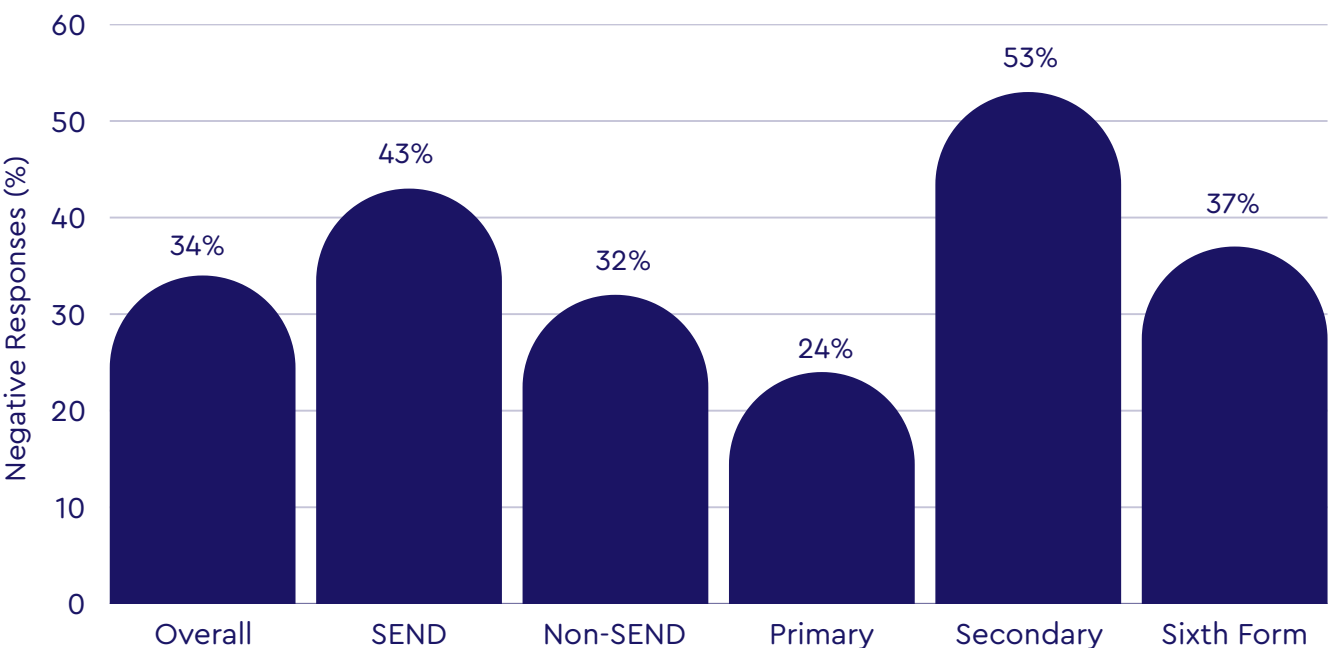
- Around **a third of pupils said they either never feel like they belong** at school or only feel like they belong a little.
- Across every question, **responses from pupils SEND were more negative** compared to those without SEND.
- Responses were almost always **more negative among pupils in secondary schools** than those in primary or sixth form, indicating a real risk that we are losing pupils' sense of belonging as they transition into secondary education.

To illustrate these findings, we have focused on three questions from the survey that particularly reflect these concerns:

1. "I feel like I belong at my school"

Over half (53%) of secondary pupils responded negatively to this question, compared with just 24% of primary pupils. Pupils with SEND were also more likely to feel a lack of belonging (43%) compared to 32% of non-SEND pupils.

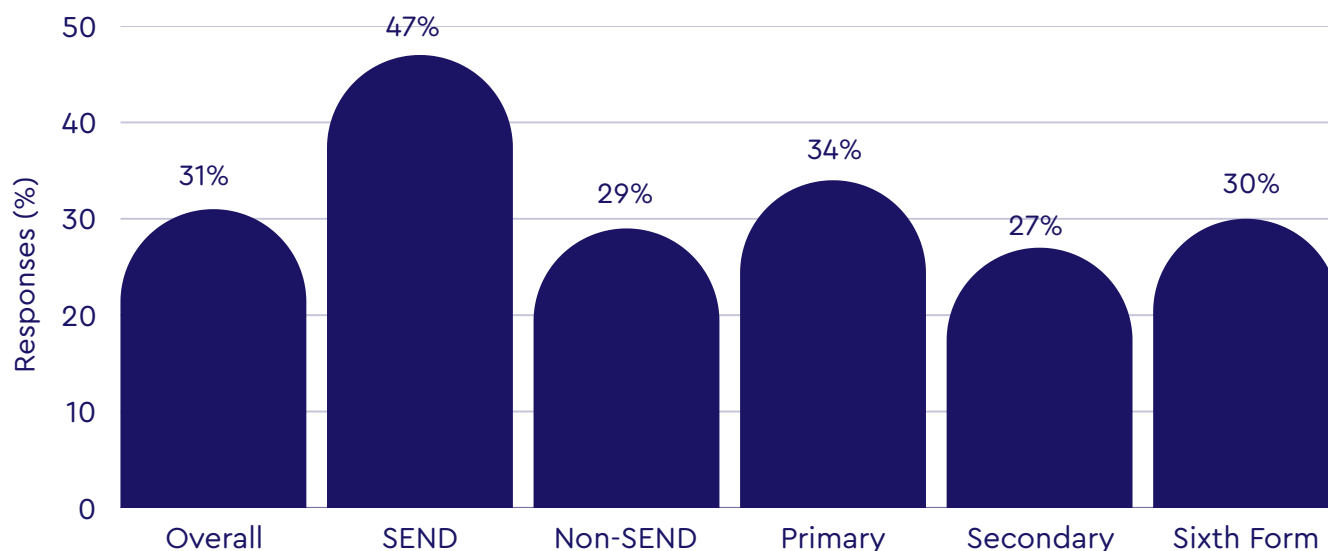
Chart 1: Pupils who do not feel like they belong at school (never/a little)



2. "I feel different from most other pupils" (reverse coded)

This question explores whether pupils feel they fit in. Nearly half of SEND pupils (47%) said they feel different from others a lot or always, compared to 29% of non-SEND pupils. Interestingly, younger pupils were more likely to report feeling different: 34% in primary compared to 27% in secondary.

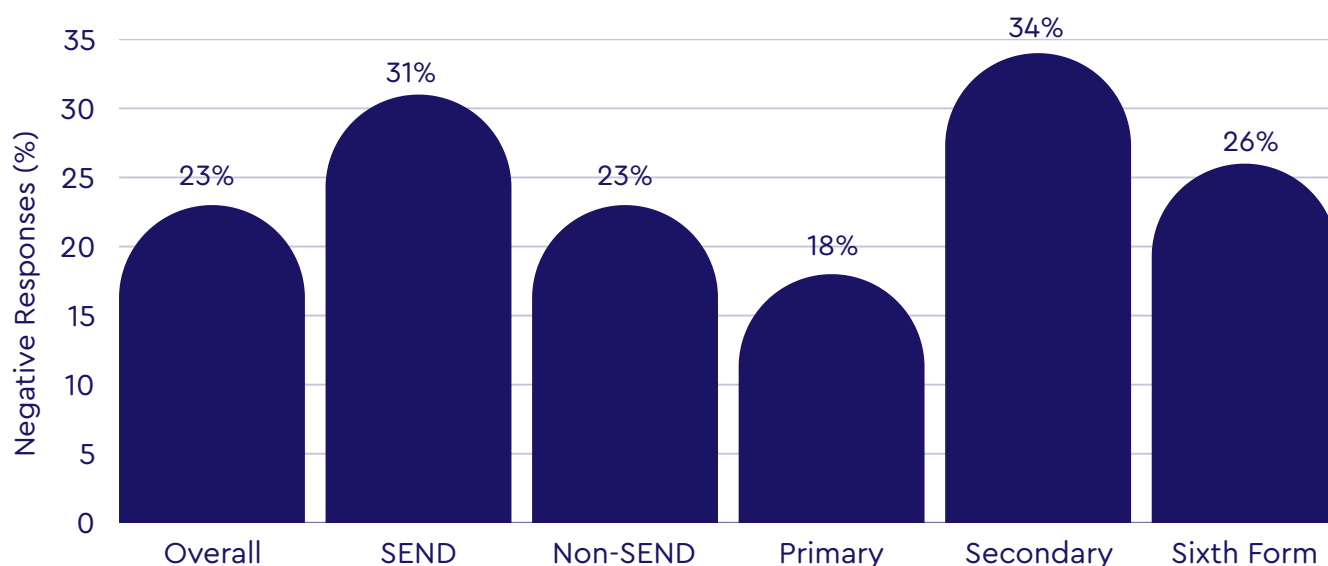
Chart 2: Pupils who feel different from most others (a lot/always)



3. "I feel included in school and classroom activities"

Almost one in three secondary pupils (34%) said they do not feel included in school or classroom activities, compared to just 18% of primary pupils. Again, SEND pupils were significantly more likely to feel excluded (31%) than their non-SEND peers (23%).

Chart 3: Pupils who do not feel included in classroom/school activities



These findings underscore the importance of targeted work to support inclusion and belonging, particularly for pupils with SEND and those in secondary education. The full report offers further breakdowns and analysis across all survey questions.

PARENT AND CARER PERSPECTIVES ON BELONGING

In our parent and carer questionnaire, 435 participants shared their views on their child's sense of belonging and inclusion in school. The seven-question survey used well-established items and responses were grouped into positive ("a lot"/"always") and negative ("never"/"a little") categories. A full breakdown of all questions and response patterns is included in the main report.

What differed from the pupil survey:

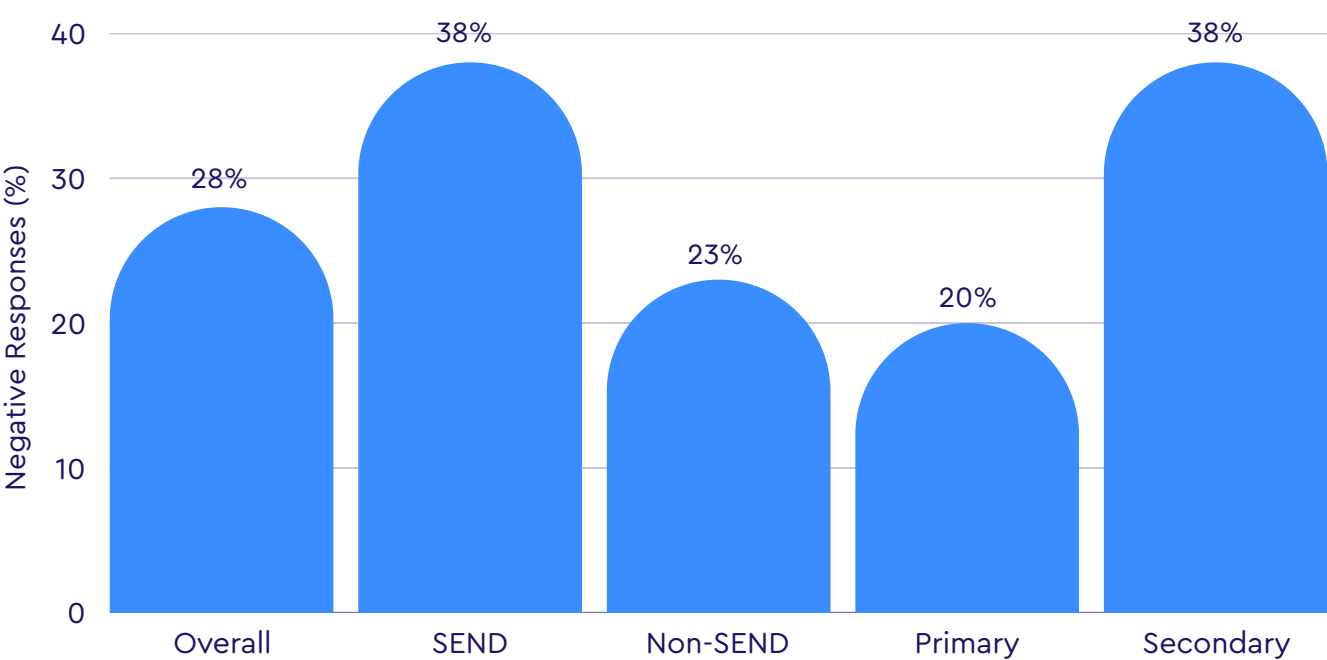
- Parents and carers were **generally more positive than pupils** about children's sense of belonging and support in school, **but worrying trends remain**.
- **Parents/carers of children with SEND consistently gave more negative responses** than those without SEND, echoing pupil findings.
- **Secondary school parents/carers reported more negatively** than those in primary, particularly when asked whether their child feels supported or included. This mirrors pupils' responses and suggests secondary transition is a key pressure point for school belonging.

To illustrate these findings, we have focused on three questions from the survey that particularly reflect these concerns:

1. "Your child feels like they belong at their school"

28% of parents overall responded negatively. This rose to 38% for parents of children with SEND and 38% for parents of secondary school children.

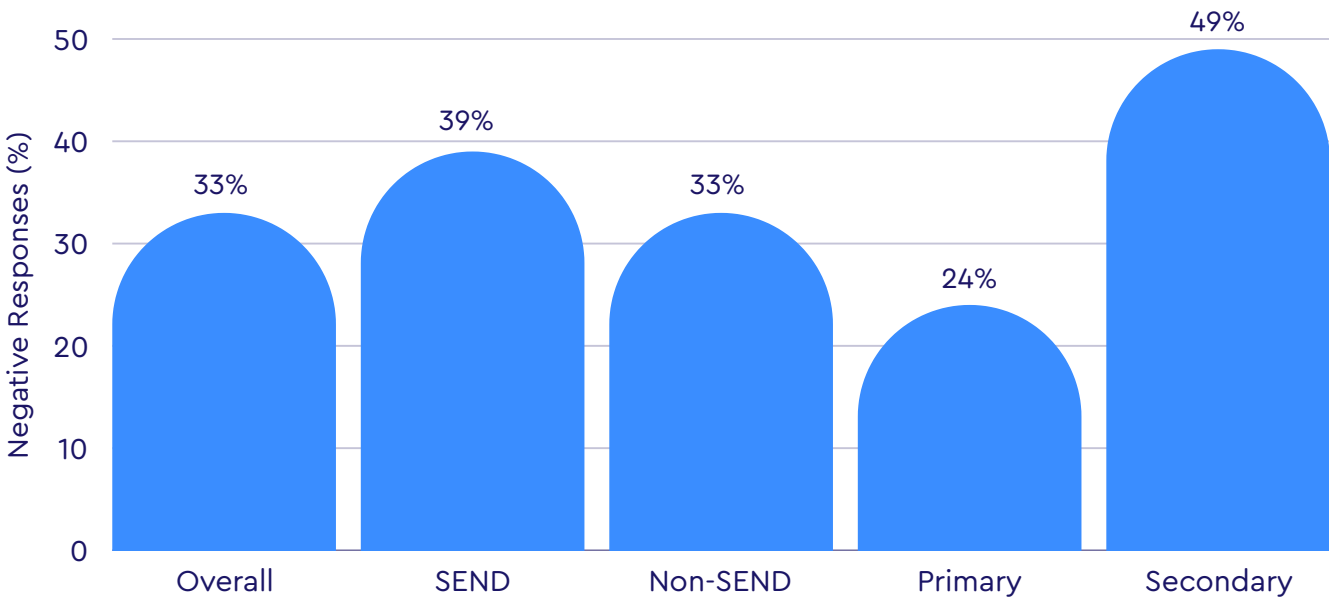
Chart 4: Parent/carers responses to child feeling they belong at school



2. "There is someone at school your child can talk to if they have a problem"

One third (33%) of parents responded negatively overall. Nearly half of parents of secondary pupils (49%) said their child lacks this connection.

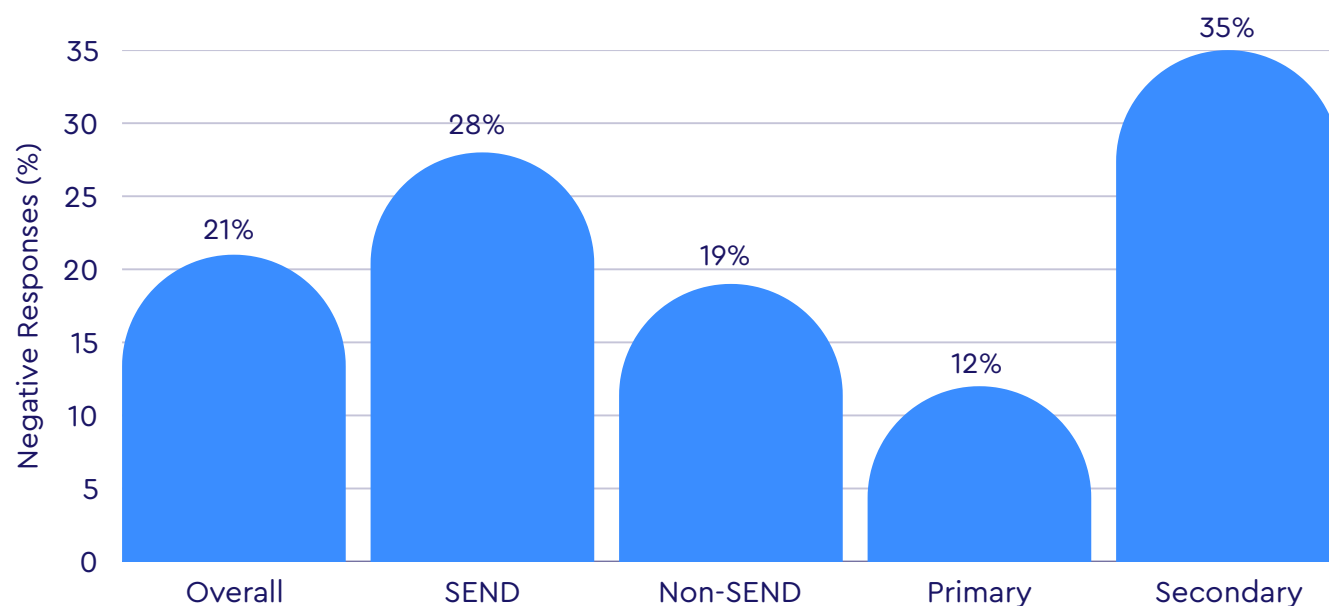
Chart 5: Parent/carer responses to adult support at school



3. "You feel your child is included in school activities"

While responses were more positive overall (21% negative), this rose to 28% for SEND parents and 35% for parents of secondary pupils.

Chart 6: Parent/carer views on child's inclusion in school activities



These patterns reinforce key themes from the pupil survey: children with SEND and those in secondary school are less likely to feel included, supported, or that they belong. The full report explores other dimensions, including how well schools listen to parents and the role of interpersonal relationships and school climate in shaping a sense of belonging.

SCHOOL STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON PUPIL BELONGING

As part of our evaluation, 248 teachers and school staff from 10 schools completed a short questionnaire about pupil belonging and inclusion. The survey included six well-tested items, with responses scored on a four-point scale. Responses of "a lot" or "always" were grouped to reflect positive belonging, and "never" or "a little" to indicate concern. Their responses did not separate into pupils with SEND or gender. The full data set is included in the main report, here we highlight the most notable findings.

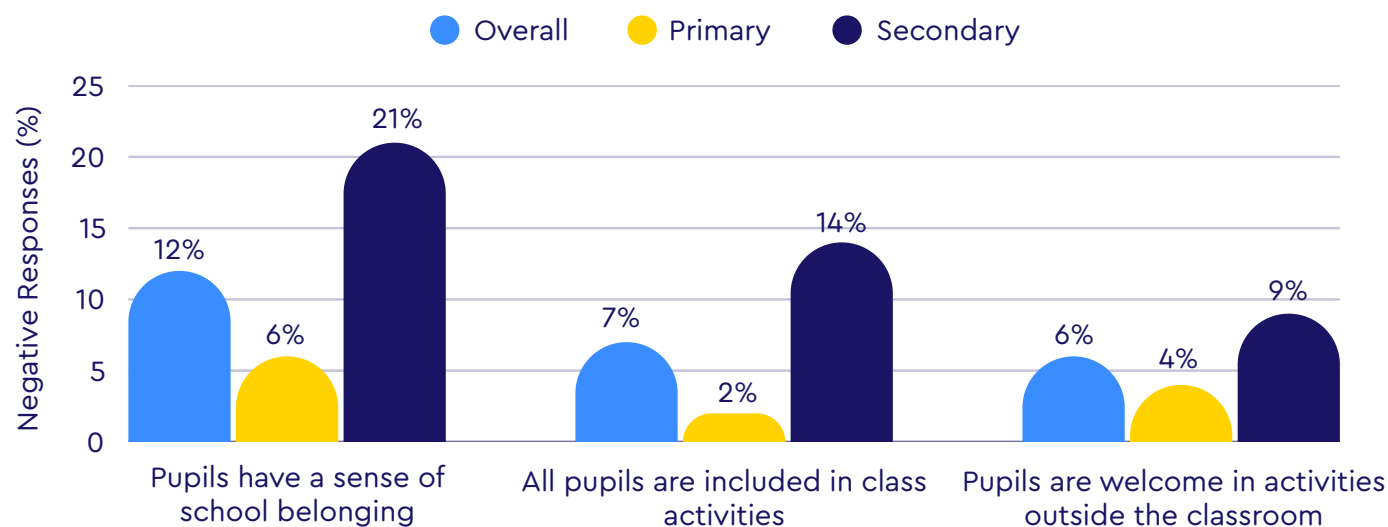
What staff told us:

- Overall, staff responses were **more positive than those from pupils and parents/carers**. However, there was a clear pattern of **greater concern among secondary school staff**, consistent with what we saw from pupil and parent feedback.
- While only **12% of staff overall** said pupils do not have a sense of school belonging, this figure rose to **21% in secondary schools**, compared to just **6% in primary**.
- Similarly, **14% of secondary staff** said not all pupils are included in classroom activities, compared to just **2% in primary schools**.

These findings suggest that while many staff feel their schools promote inclusion and belonging, **concerns increase sharply in secondary settings**, highlighting the need for specific attention to transition and adolescent experiences.

Staff responses to three key questions about pupil belonging and inclusion are summarised in the chart below. While responses were largely positive overall, the data reveals significantly more negative responses from secondary school staff compared to their primary school counterparts:

- **Pupils' sense of belonging:** 12% of all staff responded negatively, but this was over three times higher in secondary schools (21%) than in primary (6%).
- **Inclusion in classroom activities:** 7% of all staff felt not all pupils were included, rising to 14% in secondary schools compared with just 2% in primary.
- **Inclusion in activities outside the classroom:** 6% of staff overall responded negatively, with secondary staff (9%) again reporting more concern than primary staff (4%).



Insights from staff open ended reflections

Staff shared powerful reflections on what helps and hinders pupil belonging.

Positive staff reflections:

- "We encourage children to express their thoughts and ideas... where everyone's voice matters."
- "It's a beautiful place where everyone is accepted, cared for and understood."
- "Children who haven't fit in in other schools often say that they like it here."

Staff also valued a representative curriculum:

- "We work hard to make sure the children are represented in the curriculum."
- "Cultural Day is a good step in making students feel welcome."

Areas of concern:

- "The quieter students don't always feel heard or valued."
- "Some students being expelled after one incident, while others stay after several."
- "SEN students are often left out of class activities."

Staff also identified disconnects between year groups, parental disengagement, and pupils' own disengagement with the school identity as barriers to belonging.



THE IMPACT OF THE PROGRAMME SO FAR

- As part of the programme, **19 training sessions on belonging have been delivered** - 4 in person and 15 online.
- **408 members of staff across 11 schools have been trained, including 27 senior leaders.**
- **88.3%** of senior leaders trained said the training **a significant or transformative impact** on their understanding of how to promote emotional and physical safety for pupils
- **Nearly 80%** of all staff trained said they feel **extremely or very equipped to identify and support pupils at risk of being excluded or isolated**
- **97.2%** of staff said they feel **very or somewhat confident in fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment**
- **100%** of senior leaders said they are **extremely or very likely to use the daily strategies shared to foster belonging**

Schools are now putting this learning into practice in ways that are influencing whole-school systems, staff culture and daily routines. Staff across roles - from teachers and TAs to lunchtime supervisors - are using shared strategies and language to build more consistent, relationship-based environments.

One school told us: "We've started talking about belonging in every SLT meeting. It's not an add-on - it's what holds everything else together."

Several schools have redesigned their induction, behaviour and pastoral systems to better support pupils with high mobility, trauma or emotional needs. Some have reorganised staffing to create new pastoral roles by reshaping existing capacity.

One school reflected: "They were the person families already trusted. We reshaped the role around that."

Changes are also being made to curriculum and enrichment. Clubs such as sport, Lego, and sensory circuits are being adapted to reflect pupil voice and remove participation barriers - in many cases, made completely free to ensure access for all. Schools report increased attendance and participation, particularly among pupils with SEND, girls, and those facing disadvantage.

Behaviour is being reframed across settings as communication rather than disruption. As one school put it, "We don't talk about behaviour anymore. We talk about needs." Staff are embedding consistent, compassionate responses supported by tools like Zones of Regulation.

Family engagement is strengthening through co-led coffee mornings and parent events, translated into languages including Dari, Somali and Turkish. One school shared, "Parents don't want to be told - they want to tell us." These approaches are building trust and creating space for collaboration.



Playtimes and communal spaces are being reimagined to reduce flashpoints and promote emotional safety. Pupils are playing across classes, prompting and supporting each other. In one school, children used digital tools to create a daily "worry or kindness" check-in, helping quieter pupils express their feelings.

Several schools have also developed their own feedback tools and check-ins to ensure they hear from pupils who might otherwise go unheard.

Staff describe increased visibility and relational presence throughout the day, with proactive conversations in corridors and transitions helping children feel more settled. As one school shared, "When visitors come in, they don't know who the children with SEND are."

These examples demonstrate how schools are embedding belonging through their own systems, staff teams and relationships - using existing resources more creatively, joining up different approaches, and accessing additional support where needed.

Early outcomes include improved attendance, calmer classrooms, fewer behaviour incidents, reduced need for sanctions, and more inclusive access to enrichment for all pupils - including those with SEND.

We are very excited to share the full findings of the impact of the project in the autumn of 2025 and hope to continue to trailblaze this work in the field of school belonging and inclusion.



ABOUT THE NATIONAL CHILDREN'S BUREAU

For 60 years, the National Children's Bureau has worked to champion the rights of children and young people in the UK. We interrogate policy and uncover evidence to shape future legislation and develop more effective ways of supporting children and families. As a leading children's charity, we take the voices of children to the heart of Government, bringing people and organisations together to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood for the UK. We are united for a better childhood.

We bring people and organisations together under the umbrella of the NCB family to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood across the UK. Our membership groups draw partners together to drive change in key areas where we need to make childhood better. *Belonging Matters* is run by the following NCB family members:

- **Anti-Bullying Alliance:** The Anti-Bullying Alliance is a unique coalition of organisations and individuals working together to stop bullying and create safer environments in which children and young people can live, grow, play and learn. - anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/
- **Council for Disabled Children:** The Council for Disabled Children, as part of the NCB family, operates a number of different networks, programmes and special interest groups that focus on specific aspects of the SEND sector. - www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/our-ncb-family/council-disabled-children



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